

THE NINTH SCO SUMMIT: A STEP FORWARD

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The ninth Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, on June 15-16, 2009. The presidents of all the member states, i.e., Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, attended the summit. Besides the permanent members, leaders of Observer States – Prime Minister Manmohan Singh from India, President Ahmadinejad from Iran, President Asif Ali Zardari from Pakistan and First Vice Premier Norovyn Altankhuyag from Mongolia – also attended. President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai and United Nations Under-Secretary-General Lynn Pascoe were invited as special guests by the host country.

The summit concluded by signing of a number of important documents by the SCO member states, which included; a Joint Declaration; a Joint Communiqué; a Counter Terrorism Convention; an Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Ensuring International Information Security; and an Agreement on Training of Officers for Counter-Terrorism Agencies of the Member States. The Council of Heads of SCO Member States also approved the SCO Regulations on Political Diplomatic Mechanisms of Response to Events Jeopardizing Regional Peace, Security and Stability. It is also noteworthy that a decision was taken to grant the status of Dialogue Partner to Sri Lanka and Belarus.

As the SCO is gaining prominence, more countries are showing interest to engage with this Organization. Turkey and Nepal have expressed the desire to be engaged with the SCO, while Turkmenistan is a potential candidate for full membership.

The ninth SCO summit was unique in the sense that, for the first time, the format, besides a restricted meeting of the heads of SCO member states and a plenary session with the participation of the heads of all delegations, included a separate narrow-format meeting with the participants of the heads of the member states of the Organization and leaders of the Observer States. This format, announced at the end of eighth summit, reflected a new and higher level of engagement between the Members and the Observer States and could be considered a precursor to opening up the gates for enlarging SCO by accepting the Observers as full members. The SCO member States, in the Joint Communiqué, expressed satisfaction over the active participation of the Observer States in the activities of mutual interest in the SCO framework and instructed the SCO Special Experts Group to continue its work on the draft document on admitting new members to the SCO.

Pakistan and Iran have already moved applications for full membership. India, however, is hesitant to join the SCO as a full member as that may undermine its evolving strategic partnership with the U.S., which is seen by the SCO members as a competitor in Central Asia. A U.S. request for granting of Observer status in the SCO, on the other hand, has been declined by the Organization. The SCO is perhaps the only international organization where the U.S. is not present in any capacity. India, in order to avoid any misunderstanding with the U.S., has in the past been keeping a low profile in the SCO and was usually represented by low-ranking

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officials in its proceedings. Since it joined the SCO in 2005, India was represented at the annual meetings of the Council of Heads of States by its external affairs minister twice; by the petroleum minister twice; and once by the minister of state in the prime minister's office. The other Observers States' participation has been at the level of the president or the prime minister.

This was for the first time that the Indian participation was at the appropriate level – as already noted, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh participation in the summit. Why India chose to elevate the level of participation is not very clear, and there could be several reasons for that, such as: it may have been unavoidable for Manmohan Singh as the SCO summit was held back-to-back with the first Brazil-Russia-India-China (BRIC) summit; India has genuinely realized the importance and growing influence of the SCO as an international multi-purpose organization and did not want to be left out; it could also be an effort to supplement the U.S. agenda for Central Asia where the U.S. has gradually been losing ground since the Andijan incident; it could be revival of Indo-Soviet partnership to contain Chinese growing influence in Central Asia; and finally it could be a simple gesture to tell the U.S. that India has other options too. The coming months and years would reveal the Indian commitment to SCO.

Whatever the reasons, Indian participation at the highest-level is a welcome development for Pakistan for primarily two reasons; first, that it will provide a chance to the leadership of both the countries to use the side-line mechanism for bilateral discussions and, second, given that the SCO is also a security organization, it will provide both the countries an opportunity to share this forum to discuss security issues in a multilateral framework. The ninth SCO summit facilitated the re-establishment of contact between the two countries which was terminated by India following the Mumbai terrorist attacks. Though the 40-minute-long meeting between President Asif Zardari and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the side-lines of the summit could not achieve substantive results, it has facilitated resumption of foreign secretary-level talks.

Another important development which took place on the side-lines of the SCO summit was the trilateral meeting of heads of States of Russia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan have trilateral summit-level dialogue with the U.S., Turkey and Iran; Russia has become the fourth country to have such a mechanism.

In the past, the joint declarations signed by the member States at the end of each summit would usually be reflective of the SCO members' position on the prevailing international and regional political situation. These declarations are also used by the major players in the SCO – Russian and China – to state their concerns on the global strategic environment which at times has less or no significance for the other members of the SCO. For example, in the eighth SCO summit's joint declaration, it is stated that "The establishment of a global anti-missile defence system will not contribute to the maintenance of strategic balance, the international efforts for arms control and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, or the strengthening of trust between countries or regional stability." These issues are surely of high importance to Russia and China but certainly not to Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan.

However, in each of the SCO joint declarations, there are some recurring themes emphasizing regional cooperation for enhancing security and economic integration, besides suggesting strengthening the supremacy of UN system and encouraging multi-polarity and

denouncing unilateralism in international politics. The SCO member States strongly believe in the new concept of 'mutual security'. They denounce attempts to strengthening one's own security to the detriment of other's security, and believe that under the present conditions, international security must be based on the principle of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation.

Many hold the view that as the Organization moves towards maturity, the strategic competition between Russia and China is becoming more intense. Though both share many common interests in Central Asia, they have a divergent vision for the SCO's evolution serving their own long-term national interests. Russia is more interested to give SCO a security orientation with an energy-centered outlook, while China emphasizes on economic cooperation. China seeks to promote regional trade and investment, which in turn would enable it to play a larger role in the region. Russia wants to bring the energy issue in the multilateral framework, so that as a leading exporter of oil and gas it could become a dominant player to regulate prices and outflow of the energy resources from Central Asian through forming sort of an 'Energy Club'. China finds dealing with the energy issues on bilateral basis more lucrative and beneficial.

The single most important factor which keeps them together is perhaps common apprehension on the U.S. role in and agenda for Central Asia. China and Russia seek to create a Eurasian order in which U.S. influence is envisaged as being minimum. The SCO can serve as a vehicle to achieve this objective. In order to keep U.S. influence out of Eurasia, there is a possibility that both China and Russia would consider to make certain adjustments in their strategic agendas to balance their inherent strategic competition. In the latest bilateral summit, which coincided with the ninth SCO summit, between Hu Jintao and Dmitry Medvedev, the two sides "stressed that mutual support on issues related to their core interests are an important part of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership of cooperation."

The U.S. objectives in Central Asia, since the independence of Central Asian states, have been, as stated by Evan A. Feigenbaum, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, during a lecture at Nixon Center on September 6, 2007, are "to support the emergence of sovereign, independent states: states that have strategic choices; states that have some freedom of action; and states that feel secure enough to seek opportunities, including economic opportunities, in all four directions on the compass."

According to Feigenbaum, the U.S. has spent millions of dollars to help Central Asian States through multiple initiatives to make them feel secure. The transfer of responsibility for border security in Tajikistan from Russia to the Tajik forces was made possible through a 40-million-dollar U.S. package to Tajikistan. All the Central Asian States are members of the NATO's Partnership for Peace, and the U.S. has a robust security assistance programme in all five Central Asian States. The U.S. has been active in economic, trade and energy sectors as well. However, the U.S. support to the pro-democracy colour-revolutions in Central Asia and its strong stance on the Andijan killings by the Uzbek government forces provided an opportunity to Russia and China to use the anti-U.S. wave through the SCO for containing U.S. influence in Central Asia.

It is not intended here by any means to imply that the Central Asian members of SCO are just passive objects in the competition of great powers for gaining influence in a space which in fact belong to them. Since their independence, all Central Asian States are very skillfully using

geo-politics in the region to maximize their advantage and have remained engaged with all of the major players at multiple levels. The SCO for the Central Asian States is a platform which helps them to neutralize the adverse effects of the great power competition and at the same time provides them with an opportunity for pursuing objectives of development and regional integration. Despite their internal differences, the SCO is a platform which the Central Asian States can effectively use to spell out their common vision for the region in a cohesive and forceful manner.

At the ninth SCO summit, member states' heads in their statements have demonstrated a great deal of confidence in the Organization which is reflective of the future role of the Organization at the regional and global levels. The joint declaration reflects the aspirations of member states pertaining to issues such as: strengthening the role of UN in international affairs; building a more just world order; supporting the trends in multi-polarity; mitigating the effects of global financial crisis through collective efforts; strengthening counter-terrorism and anti-narcotic mechanisms; developing communication networks; information security; global currency reforms and introducing a common currency within the SCO framework for its members; non-proliferation; and a whole range of other issues impacting security, stability and development.

The SCO still has to go a long way before it actually realizes its stated objectives. There is a vast gap between what it claims and actually does. It is still a young multilateral framework which is trying to move fast to complete its various stages of evolution.